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Opinnäytteeni pääkysymys on: Mikä motivoi länsimaisen taustan omaavia itsenäisiä kuraattoreja toimimaan nomadisesti työssään? Tutkimukseni alakysymys on: Mitä ovat nomadisen kuratoriaalisen työskentelyn ammatilliset ja henkilökohtaiset hyödyt ja haitat? Tutkimukseni toinen alakysymys on: Mitä funktioita kuraattori-residensseillä on nomadisessa työskentelyssä?

Tutkimus on fenomenologis-hermeneuttinen laadullinen tutkimus. Tutkimusaineisto perustuu teemahaastatteluihin, teksteihin, omiin havaintoihin sekä opinnäytteen taiteellisenä osana toteutettuun *On to a Different Here* -näyttelyyn.

Tutkimus osoittaa, että nomadiseen työskentelyyn on useita syitä – olennaisimpana itsenäisten kuraattorien kiinnostukset erilaisia tutkimus- ja työskentelymahdollisuuksia kohtaan. Liikkuvuuden avulla voi löytää tekemistä sekä oppia muun muassa uusia ajattelutapoja. Kuraattori-residenssit mahdollistavat keskittyneempää työskentelyä, oppimista ja verkostoitumista.

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#### Abstract

The primary research question of my thesis is: What motivates independent curators of Western origin to be nomadic in their practice? The secondary research question is: What are the professional and personal benefits and disadvantages of nomadic curatorial practice? Another secondary question is: What functions do curatorial residencies play in the nomadic practice?

The study is a phenomenological hermeneutic qualitative research. The material is based on thematic interviews, texts, personal observations and the *On to a Different Here* exhibition, which was the artistic part of this thesis.

The study shows that there are several reasons for nomadic practice – mainly the interests of independent curators towards different research and work opportunities. Through mobility, one can find things to do and learn new ways of thinking, among other things. Curatorial residencies facilitate more focused work, learning and networking.

**Avainsanat** kuratointi, nykyaide, nomadismi, liikkuvuus, kansainvälisyys, globalisaatio, altermodernismi, näyttelyt, muutos, kestävä kehitys, residenssit // curating, contemporary art, nomadism, mobility, internationality, globalisation, altermodernism, exhibitions, change, sustainability, residencies

# **Nomadic Agency**

**On the mobility of independent curators**

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Master's Thesis

Curating, Managing and Mediating Art

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# 1. INTRODUCTION

## 1.1. Some background

We live in an age characterized by globalisation. A process that started long ago with incentives of economic gain has since expanded into various forms, including culture and more specifically, contemporary art, which is the realm that this investigation is mostly about. As with economic globalisation, the globalisation of contemporary art has not happened naturally nor on equal terms. As Charlotte Bydler writes:

[...] use of communications technologies surely brought *some* people and art worlds closer, but *globally* did not tie together all of the world from Qaanaaq, Greenland to Banjul, Gambia and Hobart, Tasmania. Nevertheless, intensified international relations in the “global village” brought intimations of a homogenized and hegemonic art history, the expansion of one community into other areas.<sup>1</sup>

Obviously, artistic activities have been practiced all over the world throughout history, but art history as it is most commonly taught, and especially contemporary art history, is centred on Europe and the United States of America. I think it is fair to say contemporary art as we know it with its discourses is a Western export that has been adopted globally. Evidence of this can be found in the contemporary art museums and biennials that have emerged on all continents – many, if not all set up and talked of in Western styles and manner(ism)s.

I think this continued domination of the West is rather interesting, considering all the talk of globalisation and post-colonialism. The playground is still far from level, although a privileged Westerner may easily forget that. The inequality of representation and the questionable concepts of ‘centre’ and ‘periphery’ drove me, in part, to choose mobility and nomadism as the central themes for this research. Also, I am a bit of a nomad myself, and interested in non-Western cultures (such as those of Africa, Asia, the Middle East and Latin America).

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<sup>1</sup> Bydler 2004, 14.

## 1.2. The development of my nomadic identity

Nomadic is a term that defines my thinking and practice, although I only became aware of it around 2010. I have always been curious. The forest adventures of my childhood and my fascination with maps and languages were hints of future developments. Holiday trips abroad widened my worldview and increased my interest in other cultures. My first student exchange (2002) and subsequent internships in Barcelona strengthened my international identity, views on art and interest in the Spanish-speaking world.

In Barcelona, I was a founding member, and involved in the running of an experimental art space called La Serilla, which was situated in the traditional immigrant neighbourhood of El Raval (2003). The surroundings and the clientele of La Serilla were very international and many people I talked with had thoughts and feelings of rootlessness and the search of one's place in world – all relating to the concept of nomadism. After the alternative space of La Serilla, I also did an internship at MACBA, the Museum of Contemporary Art of Barcelona (2004). There, I was involved in the *How Do We Want to be Governed?* exhibition project, curated by Roger M. Buergel. The exhibition dealt with various political issues and was alternative in the sense that the exhibition venues were outside of the museum, some in fairly marginal environments. The exhibition process clarified my views on the organization of big, thematic exhibitions, the communality of art and the importance of theory and context.

These lessons were of use in the following years, as I coordinated the activities of MAA-tila in Helsinki and realized several international exhibition projects with different partners. I had also developed an interest in Latin America in Barcelona. Later in Helsinki I got to know a Colombian artist called German Bernal Caicedo, who inherited a small farm near Bogotá, the capital of Colombia. Together we developed ideas of turning it into an artist residency, and in early 2010 the Arcapacha art residency was a reality. In the summer of 2011 I traveled to Latin America – Colombia – for the first time. Spending time in the “periphery” certainly offered different learning opportunities from the established centres of art. The same went for working. The Western metropolises are filled with art professionals, who compete for the same opportunities of support and exposure. Living and exhibition spaces are expensive, especially in London and New York, and personal relationships often mean more than professional skill and expertise. This leads to cultures of competition that I feel reluctant about, and do not facilitate feelings of community.

The atmosphere in Colombia was quite different. The contemporary art scene felt fresh and seemed to be growing. People were enthusiastic and excited about what was happening. There was no shortage of talent, and living costs and spaces seemed affordable. The atmosphere was experimental and communal, and the climate was not too bad either. The “peripheries” also have their problems, of course. In Colombia for example, public support for culture is not up to north European levels and there are still issues with security. Progress is being made on both of these fronts, though. It is also true that world class cultural institutions and events are not as numerous in the area as in Europe or the United States. In a way though, the scarcity of big authorities makes the grassroots level more active, ambitious and interesting. The discussions may be more local than in the West, but similar themes are present. Thanks to the Internet, one can participate in many discussions of contemporary art regardless of place. Additionally, different locations create different perspectives. This is one of the benefits of mobility. Thinking remains fluid when one understands the alternative meanings of cultural and geographical contexts.

### 1.3. Description of the study

This thesis consists of two main parts: an exhibition I curated called *On to a Different Here*, and this written part. The exhibition was an artistic treatise on nomadism, mobility and escapist impulses held at XL Art Space. This written part deals with the same themes but in a more down-to-earth way. It includes interviews with two nomadic independent curators and a former director of a residency programme.

In chapter 2 I elaborate on my methodology, material, questions and hypotheses. In chapter 3 I reflect on curating and international mobility as a phenomenon in the art world. The interviews with my fellow curators provide relevant quotations and food for thought. In chapter 4 I write about the relevance of residencies in the art world, with quotations from my interview with Kitty Scott. In chapter 5, I go through the process of curating the *On to a Different Here* exhibition and share my thoughts regarding the works that I chose to show. In chapter 6, ie. Conclusion, I summarize my findings and thoughts on the questions I have dealt with in this study and glance towards the future.

## 2. METHODOLOGY AND MATERIAL

### 2.1. Research questions and hypotheses

In this thesis my primary aim is to find out what motivates independent curators of Western origin to be nomadic in their practice. This question interests me as international mobility appeals to me and is such a common thing in independent curatorial practice. The reasons and motivations for such mobility are relevant as we should all try to reduce our carbon footprints in order to keep the planet habitable.

With ecological concerns in mind, I also aim to learn about the professional and personal benefits and disadvantages of nomadic curatorial practice. When it comes to traveling, I have experienced many ups and some downs, and assume that professional mobility also entails various issues. Additionally, I will look into curatorial residencies, which in my view are important places in the art world ecosystem. What functions do curatorial residencies play in the nomadic practice?

I started off with a couple of hypotheses regarding nomadism and curatorial residencies: Nomadism is a relevant concept, as it describes the condition of many independent curators in both practical and intellectual terms. Curators may want to or have to move around physically to find work, audiences and personal development. Intellectual nomadism is beneficial in understanding issues and developing new ideas.

Curatorial residencies serve an important purpose in the contemporary art world. They facilitate meaningful mobility and networking – leading to new thinking and projects – as well as allow for “free time” to focus on research, reflection and writing, among other things.

### 2.2. Research methods

This thesis is a phenomenological hermeneutic qualitative study utilising texts, interviews and personal observations. Phenomenological analysis is based on discussions and



reflections of direct sense perception and experiences of the researched phenomenon.<sup>2</sup> Hermeneutic analysis is a name for various methods of analysis, which are based on interpreting. Hermeneutic analysis enables one to elicit an in-depth understanding of meanings of, for example: human practices, culture, works of art and texts. A combination of the rules of phenomenological analysis and hermeneutics is known as phenomenological hermeneutic analysis.<sup>3</sup>

The underlying theoretical framework is based on the concept of 'altermodernity', introduced by Nicolas Bourriaud in 2005, and further developed with the 2009 Tate Triennial called *Altermodern*, which he curated. Bourriaud claimed that postmodernism was no longer a valid concept for interpreting the current age, and described the emergence of a global altermodernity.<sup>4</sup>

I explored the themes of location, movement, personal transformation and new cultural perceptions in the exhibition I curated as part of this thesis. The exhibition was called *On to a Different Here* and it presented works by four artists: Gonzalo Lebrija, Ivan Krassoievitch, Jaakko Pallasvuori and Jani Ruscica. It was held at an experimental art space called XL Art Space in Helsinki from 4.12.2013 until 18.1.2014. The exhibited works and the discussions I had with the artists resonated with me and inspired new thinking.

In regards to the motivations and practices of nomadic independent curators, I interviewed two international independent curators / art workers: Vanessa Gocksch and Veronica Wiman. These interviews were conducted via e-mail. I sent the questions to Gocksch and Wiman and received their written replies within a few weeks.

In regards to curatorial residencies, I interviewed Kitty Scott, who was the director of Visual Arts at the Banff Centre – a large cultural complex with residency programmes – in Alberta, Canada, from 2007 until 2012. This interview was a semi-structured thematic interview which I conducted live with her at the Nida Art Colony in Lithuania on

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<sup>2</sup> Method Map, Phenomenological Analysis, University of Jyväskylä website, <https://koppa.jyu.fi/avoimet/hum/menetelmapolkuja/en/methodmap/data-analysis/phenomenological-analysis>, accessed 16.12.2015.

<sup>3</sup> Method Map, Hermeneutic Analysis, University of Jyväskylä website, <https://koppa.jyu.fi/avoimet/hum/menetelmapolkuja/en/methodmap/data-analysis/hermeneutic-analysis>, accessed 16.12.2015.

<sup>4</sup> Bourriaud, "Altermodern explained: manifesto", Tate Britain website, <http://www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-britain/exhibition/altermodern/explain-altermodern/altermodern-explained-manifesto>, accessed 16.12.2015.

20.11.2012. I recorded the interview and wrote a transcript afterwards. Semi-structured interviewing is more flexible than standardised methods such as the structured interview or survey. Although the interviewer in this technique will have some established general topics for investigation, this method allows for the exploration of emergent themes and ideas rather than relying only on concepts and questions defined in advance of the interview.<sup>5</sup>

Additionally, I looked into existing materials such as books and articles for references and ideas.

### 2.3. Relevance of the research

Nomadism is something of a buzzword in the contemporary art world. It sounds more poetic than mobility and precariousness, although it often means the same thing. There is, however, an important intellectual dimension to the concept of nomadism, that is far from exhausted. I think it relates to curating in relevant ways and can be a source of inspiration for many.

Physical nomadism may feed intellectual nomadism and vice versa. In any case, mobility is commonplace for curators and it is worth the while to reflect upon the reasons for it, as well as its consequences. Is it necessary and can it be justified in this day and age of climate change?

The role of curators has diversified a lot. Originally thought of as the caretakers of collections in museums, curators can and do assume a wide variety of roles nowadays. One role that is of great importance is the role of researcher. Contemporary art is a boundless field in the sense that it can include all kinds of disciplines, media (forms) and thinking. Art mixes with philosophy, science and social activism, for example.

One could spend more than a lifetime thinking about the aesthetics and formalisms of more traditional types of art, so the expanded field certainly offers room for thought – and creates needs for more research.

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<sup>5</sup> Semi-structured interviews, UK Data Service website, <https://www.ukdataservice.ac.uk/teaching-resources/interview/semi-structured>, accessed 16.12.2015.

The field of contemporary art has expanded geographically as well. Whereas the focus in the 1990s still may have been in Europe and North America, we now live in a more globalised, de-centred (art) world. This development is ongoing and far from complete.

### 3. CURATING AND INTERNATIONAL MOBILITY

#### 3.1. A bit of history and altermodernity

In the history of art, curating is a fairly recent phenomenon. Art critics, gallerists and museum directors have existed at least since the 19th century, but curators – independent ones specifically – emerged only as late as the 1960s and onwards. Still, as Cristophe Cherix has put it, “the curator’s *raison d’être* remains largely undefined. No real methodology or clear legacy stands out in spite of today’s proliferation of courses in curatorial studies.”<sup>6</sup>

Until the appearance of the curator, artists mostly acted as their own mediators and organized their own exhibitions. This is still true to a large extent, but curators have carved out a place for themselves in the ecosystem of art. By the 1970s, the majority of the most influential shows were organized by art professionals rather than artists.<sup>7</sup> These professionals had personalities, specialities and aspirations that they expressed with the exhibitions they organized. What happened could be summarized as “the rise of the curator as creator”<sup>8</sup>. Further, in the words of Paul O’Neill:

We have seen a gradual change from the perception of the curator as carer and behind-the-scenes aesthetic arbiter to a more centralised position on a much broader stage, with a creative, political and active part to play in the production, mediation and dissemination of art itself.<sup>9</sup>

O’Neill and others mention the 1990s as the decade of ‘the turn towards curating’, when much of the above-mentioned change of practice and perception took place. Additionally, O’Neill talks of the advent of the nomadic, global curator:

The last decade also brought cheaper air travel, a greater mobility of populations and the advent of the Internet, enabling art professionals greater access to places, peoples and cultures. There was a radical increase in the number of recurring, large-scale, international exhibitions – resulting from the structural

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<sup>6</sup> Cherix (Obrist), 2010, 6.

<sup>7</sup> Cherix (Obrist), 2010, 7.

<sup>8</sup> Altshuler, 1994, 236.

<sup>9</sup> O’Neill, 2007, 12.

consequences of an expanding art market – with certain curators becoming internationally-networked service-providers, offering their skills to a diverse exhibition market.<sup>10</sup>

Rather than these global star curators, I am interested in nomadism of a somewhat humbler kind – practices that are more down-to-earth and take into account the realities beyond the art world in ways that resemble activism. However, the theoretical framework of this study comes from Nicolas Bourriaud, who can certainly be considered a global star curator. In his *Altermodern* manifesto he describes an increasingly global, decentralised world, where multiculturalism and identity is being overtaken by creolisation.<sup>11</sup>

While I am not convinced we have reached a truly globalised state of culture, I certainly think that is what we should aspire to. I believe Bourriaud was also envisioning the future, while being observant of current developments and recognizing the shortcomings of postmodernism in explaining and responding to them.

If twentieth-century modernism was above all a western cultural phenomenon, altermodernity arises out of planetary negotiations, discussions between agents from different cultures. Stripped of a centre, it can only be polyglot. Altermodernity is characterised by translation, unlike the modernism of the twentieth century which spoke the abstract language of the colonial west, and postmodernism, which encloses artistic phenomena in origins and identities.<sup>12</sup>

As Bourriaud emphasizes globalisation, I think he is still quite clearly talking from a Western point of view, not quite free of the colonial mindset. I would argue origins are still relevant and multiculturalism is not that normal in many parts of the world. Creolisation is certainly taking place in many areas and in many ways, but so are movements against it. Bourriaud was right in being concerned about the traditionalist, far-right withdrawal, as it has definitely become a significant phenomenon in Europe in recent years.

Additionally, the extent of translation in the contemporary art world is questionable. I would certainly like to see more divergence from the Western styles of art discourse.

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<sup>10</sup> O'Neill, 2007, 16.

<sup>11</sup> Bourriaud, "Altermodern explained: manifesto", Tate Britain website, <http://www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-britain/exhibition/altermodern/explain-altermodern/altermodern-explained-manifesto>, accessed 16.12.2015.

<sup>12</sup> Bourriaud, "Altermodern explained: manifesto", Tate Britain website, <http://www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-britain/exhibition/altermodern/explain-altermodern/altermodern-explained-manifesto>, accessed 16.12.2015.

### 3.2. International mobility

The world of contemporary art is very international. Many artists, curators and critics are frequent travelers. This is particularly true with regard to the most notable curators. However, the programming they provide for big institutions like museums and biennials, tend to offer similar types of ideas and contents. As Chinese art historian Meiqin Wang points out:

The proliferation of biennials and triennials in Asia does seem to be an example of globalization, in the sense that this single model is sweeping over Asian contemporary art. In addition, similar groups of artists are invited to show their art in exhibitions across the world and we see the names of a few star curators appear again and again in many biennials/triennials, all of which have inevitably resulted in the repetitive showcasing of familiar artworks.<sup>13</sup>

In this regard, the amount of travel contemporary art professionals do is somewhat questionable considering our environmental problems and the heavy CO2 emissions of air travel in particular.

International exchange is important, nonetheless. It enriches our cultures and advances the creation of new knowledge and mutual understanding. It is also simply necessary for many art professionals due to the scarcity of audiences and work opportunities. Hence, it is important to think about what responsible, meaningful and sustainable internationality could mean in the context of contemporary art. Frequent flying should be well justified. The cultural exchange practiced by museums and other art institutions – such as international exhibitions and seminars – can be good and meaningful, if done in ways that actually bring new things to the table, so to speak. The activities of institutions are public and include a certain amount of research and critical thinking, which can benefit the world at large. Still, institutions could be somewhat bolder in regards to their content choices, at least in Finland. Our Museum of Contemporary Art Kiasma, for example, has not been very fresh or stimulating in recent years, in my opinion. Maybe there has not been enough time for investigative thinking, immersion and the search of the new.

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<sup>13</sup> Wang, Meiqin, Reflecting on International Biennials and Triennials in Asia, 2008, <http://www.aaa.org.hk/Diaaalogue/Details/562>, accessed 1.3.2016.

Some institutions are more attuned to freshness than others, of course. It can certainly be found outside and on the fringes of the established art world. For me, these so-called fringes and grassroots levels are the most interesting areas of the contemporary art world, and much of my practice has taken place there. The practices of many grassroots actors – artists and curators – are also characterized by international mobility, a type of nomadism. Due to scarce resources, their travels are usually for good reasons, well thought out and productive. Instead of brand value creation and routine, their movements are based on new projects and the production of new knowledge. The work of these artists and curators often involves social and political dimensions. They may spend several months in different residencies, getting to know new environments, doing research and networking. Consequently, their interaction with local cultures and scenes is deeper than in the cases of busy star curators, who mainly tend to move between hotels and exhibition venues. These types of visits are called ‘parachuting’, as the person just drops in for a while and does not really exit the safe bubble he or she is bestowed upon.

In basic terms, I have found it useful to think about the difference between tourists and explorers. Tourism is comfortable, but exploration is more exciting. Thus, curator as explorer is also an appropriate metaphor for the type of practice I am describing and looking into.

Historically, explorers explored, studied and mapped geographically unknown areas and possibly the people who inhabited those areas. These days, there are not many geographically unknown areas, but there is plenty of cultural and intellectual exploration to be done. There is so much information – and culture – that basically an individual’s options are to either study a specific field deeply or get a superficial understanding of various fields. The search engines of the Internet allow people to settle for superficial knowledge, although there is potential for so much more. Ideally, the role of the curator enables one to dive into the oceans of art and information, look for topics and contents and turn them into art exhibitions and/or publications. In his *Altermodern* manifesto, Nicolas Bourriaud assigns a similar task to artists:

Today's art explores the bonds that text and image, time and space, weave between themselves. Artists are responding to a new globalised perception. They traverse a cultural landscape saturated with signs and create new pathways between multiple formats of expression and communication.<sup>14</sup>

Bourriaud's manifesto is obviously poetic, and as I interpret it, the above statement describes the increasing interdisciplinarity of contemporary art. Exploration of different fields and formats is also nomadism of the intellectual sort. While that certainly happens, I am not convinced we have reached a truly globalised state of culture yet. His privileged Western position is quite clear, and illustrates an ongoing disregard for the "peripheries".

With globalisation, there has been a lot of discussion about the homogenisation of culture. It has been noted that in the global cultural exchange, the 'developed' Western world – or the so called "global north" – dominates and spreads its culture into the 'less developed' "global south". The cultural richness of the "south" has largely been disregarded. The supposedly international world of contemporary art is also still mostly defined by Western actors and contents. For a curator, this situation allows for new kinds of exploration and investigation possibilities, with a lot of room for further cultural exchange, development and subversion. Challenging the Western hegemony is important, but far from easy, as Paula Barreiro López points out:

The monolithic view of East-West relations, as well as the still predominant accounts of the transfer of the avant-garde from Paris to New York, is challenged when the focus is widened to take in more complex and dialectic relations between art, society, means of production, politics, institutions and countries. Westernization and Eurocentrism were, and still are, claims against which multiple artists, critics and intellectuals position themselves in order to find other narratives. This special issue proves the increasing existence of a multiplicity of views, ruptures, regions and comprehensions that art historians and art critics are trying to take in account. Nevertheless, we should be fully aware that such perspectives are inevitably challenged by the power of a discursive imperialism which it is difficult to counter. Hegemonic accounts within art history – even those trying openly to participate in the global turn – demonstrate the difficulty of getting out of the Western shadow of 'global thinking'.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Bourriaud, "Altermodern explained: manifesto", Tate Britain website, <http://www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-britain/exhibition/altermodern/explain-altermodern/altermodern-explained-manifesto>, accessed 16.12.2015.

<sup>15</sup> Barreiro López, Paula, *Globalization and Art in the Twentieth Century*, 2013, <http://www.thirdtext.org/globalization-and-art-in-the-twentieth-century>, accessed 1.3.2016.



### 3.3. Research and effect

Curator's work usually includes research. This is particularly true when it comes to independent curators. In order to stay up-to-date they have to constantly follow different developments and discussions, as well as social phenomena in general. In addition to knowledge of art and artists, the creation of interesting exhibitions requires wide-ranging theoretical thinking, development of exhibition themes and placing them into larger social and cultural contexts and discussions.

Curators usually aim to say something with their exhibitions – show something new, raise awareness and provoke discussion. In this sense curating could be compared to journalism.<sup>16</sup> Journalists – especially independent and investigative ones – try to write fresh stories and bring up things that are not widely known yet. In addition to income and fame, they are supposedly motivated by the idea of creating and spreading understanding regarding the issue at hand, and possibly even creating some change.

Like journalists, artists and curators still encounter censorship while defending the ideal of free speech. This is proof of the transformative power of art. Many artists question established ideas and opinions and can express complex issues in brilliantly clear ways. In less democratic countries the authorities may take such expressions very seriously. In recent years for example, cartoonists and street artists have been beaten and arrested in the Middle East during the Arab Spring. In China, Ai Weiwei was arrested in 2011 after he criticized the country's administration. In Russia, members of Pussy Riot, the feminist punk rock protest group, were arrested and jailed in 2012. In China and Russia, freedom of speech is limited by totalitarianism. However, the same ideal of freedom is also threatened in the Western world as conservative powers such as rightwing populism and neoliberal economic policies gain ground. A case in point was the murder of Pavlos Fyssas, the Greek anti-fascist rapper, who was killed in Athens in 2013 by a gang affiliated with the far-right Golden Dawn party. In addition to physical violence, critical artists may witness the dwindling of public support for their artistic activities.

With nationalism and xenophobia intensifying in Europe, it is imperative to foster what Marsha Meskimmon has termed 'cosmopolitan imagination':

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<sup>16</sup> Obviously, not all curators and journalists focus on the production of new knowledge and change, but here I point to curatorial thinking in which it is essential.

Cosmopolitan imagination is an emergent concept, it does not describe law or public policy and it cannot assure compliance in that sense. However, it is also a future-oriented and generative concept, able to locate and affect us profoundly by transforming our relationship with/in the world. Cosmopolitan imagination generates conversations in a field of flesh, fully sensory, embodied processes of interrogation, critique and dialogue that can enable us to think of our homes and ourselves as open to change and alterity. Understanding ourselves as wholly embedded within the world, we can imagine people and things beyond our immediate experience and develop our ability to respond to very different spaces, meanings and others.<sup>17</sup>

Conversations and dialogue are things that curators and journalists can bring to the public sphere. Thus, their nomadism, research and output are important and potential methods of affecting socio-cultural conditions.

### 3.4. Between worlds – independent art activists

For this research, I interviewed Vanessa Gocksch and Veronica Wiman, who are inspiring and widely international cultural actors. I had met them both previously in Helsinki. I met Gocksch during the Pixelache festival in 2005. She is a Belgian-born artist-organizer currently based in Colombia. While there, Gocksch has founded an organization called Intermundos, which aims to bring forth the cultural richness of Colombia and engage in active interaction with the ‘global north’. She is also the VJ of a band called Systema Solar and involved in artistic residencies on the Caribbean coast of Colombia. The defining themes of her practice are ecology, community, do-it-yourself attitude and the creative use of technology. Her thinking has some activist traits:

*I am mostly interested in the search for beauty and femininity, interfaces between nature and technology, ecology, do-it-yourself or let's do it together technology, audiovisual story telling, art in the urban space or in the community... Basically I like to work with projects that are directly related to either community or ecology. I feel our planet is at great risk today because of the stress the environment has suffered and it is imperative to try and reach out to the public at large to make them more conscious of what is happening to our world. Although purely aesthetic or intellectual or conceptual art can be amusing, I am personally a bit too worried about the actual situation to want to spend too much time on it. I prefer to push forward initiatives which will bring us closer together as a community, strengthen feminine values and bring us closer to nature.*

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<sup>17</sup> Meskimmon, 2011, 8.

Following Gocksch's activities it becomes clear that she emphasizes practical approaches over theoretical conceptualization and aesthetization. The events, workshops, documentary films and radio programs of the Intermundos organization are good examples of this. Gocksch has also built a natural, native Caribbean style home for herself near the village of Taganga.

Another person I interviewed is Veronica Wiman, a Swedish independent curator, writer and teacher. I met her in 2007, while she was working at Frame Visual Art Finland, as the coordinator of the *Nordic Baltic Curatorial Platform*. Wiman has worked very internationally, both independently and institutionally. Her projects are often quite political and communal in nature. She has an impressively diverse work history. As examples she mentioned the *Civic Matters* project realized at the Los Angeles Contemporary Art Center in 2006 and the *Urban Concerns* project realized at Bildmuseet and Johannesburg Art Gallery in 2008. She has also worked in Colombia, mainly in Cali, where she, among other things, founded a contemporary art space called EAC (Espacio de Arte Contemporáneo) in connection with the local La Tertulia museum.

Both Gocksch and Wiman have combined three qualities in their practice which I consider essential for myself: idealism, independence and internationality. These qualities are also combined in the concept of the nomad which I use. The nomad questions static structures and borders, is free to follow his or her own interests and to act independently without institutional frames. This definition is a poetically charged ideal, which in practice tends to involve problems and compromises, mostly of the economic type. Nonetheless, I will go ahead with the concept of idealism and its definitions.

### 3.5. The significance of idealism in curatorial work

According Vocabulary.com, the primary meanings of idealism are:

1. elevated ideals or conduct; the quality of believing that ideals should be pursued
2. (philosophy) the philosophical theory that ideas are the only reality<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Vocabulary.com, idealism, <https://www.vocabulary.com/dictionary/idealism>, accessed 1.3.2016.

In my view, there is a huge need for real, progressive idealism nowadays, in the sense of elevated ideals and conduct. If our thinking and behaviour do not change on both the global and local level, our future on this planet will be very challenging in many ways. My understanding of idealism connects strongly to material reality and thus resembles activist thinking. Personal is also political, and we should push ideas of change and paradigm shift more strongly into the public discussion. Bringing about significant sociopolitical changes requires the cooperation of large numbers of people.

So why work with art and not as a journalist or full-time activist, for example? Art may be a marginal part of society, but it is often a part that feeds new ideas into mainstream culture. Art is also very diverse as a field of action. There are no limits to what contemporary art can be, so one can incorporate journalistic or activist approaches to one's practice, if so willing. Curating also allows for much more. Exhibitions can be independent worlds, where imagination and thinking can be liberated in unique ways. I totally agree with Veronica Wiman's view of curating:

*Curating is interesting to me in many aspects. Mostly for the environment of and for dreams, opinions, problematic topics and dialogues, that one can create. The possibility to offer an audience a "space" different from what everyday gives or means. I see it as the ultimate field to build awareness, joy, community and empowerment.*

Art works well as an area of idealistic and utopian thinking. Art does not have to be serious or realistic in order to be effective and political. In art, one can play with hypotheses and metaphors that can be more powerful than communication based on everyday reality. The utopian dimension helps us envision and realize what would be possible if we dared to open up our thinking. Vanessa Gocksch summarizes the special quality of art beautifully:

*In our modern day society the arts seem to be the only layer of society where imagination, dreams and intuition have a place. Perhaps this is why culture attracts me – because its a westerner's version of what perhaps "dreamtime" would be to the Aborigines.*

*Dreamtime* is a central concept in the mythology of the Australian Aborigines. It refers to a time before time, when spiritual ancestors dreamed the world into being. According to the Aborigines, dreamtime still exists. It is a spiritual dimension parallel to our physical reality,

which can be accessed through ritualistic means. Thus, dreamtime and the creation of the world are ongoing processes that we can take part in.

The concepts of idealism and nomadism go well together with the idea of dreaming up the world. We can freely wander in imaginary worlds and create views about how the world should be. By believing and acting in accordance with our ideas we shape the world towards our 'dreams' or utopias. Art exhibitions and events are good ways to present ideas and views, and propose questions. Changing the whole world by curating may not be possible, but at least we can create new, temporary worlds in the form of exhibitions.

In addition to inspiring exhibitions, artistry and political activism can be combined in different kinds of interventions. Usually interventions are planned actions in public space. Their purpose is often to make visible and raise awareness of certain social issues, conventions or structures and to create fractures in dominant, structured representations of reality. A Western person's perception of reality can be very mediated. The media and other people have a great influence on how we see and understand things and phenomena. This is another reason why the attitude of an explorer is useful. Stereotypical and popular views of issues and places often prove insufficient or even false on closer inspection.

Questioning prevalent and hegemonic ways of thinking is one of the most essential aspects of art. Open, nomadic thinking – which instead of just one reference group, takes into consideration the views of many different groups and individuals – helps with the questioning of both artistic and other social conventions.

### 3.6. Liquid nomadism and everyday challenges

Independence is a central characteristic of the nomad curator. In the context of curatorial practice, independence manifests itself mainly in differences of thinking and working. Independent thinking certainly takes place in institutions too, but the operating structures are usually somewhat stiff and there is not much time for research activities. Additionally, traditions and the need for consensus often weigh more than experimental and provocative ideas. One reason for the cautiousness of institutions is probably in their

funding structures. In Finland for example, state support and corporate sponsorships do not necessarily encourage the development of revolutionary themes.

Independent curators may be more free than their institutional colleagues who are bound to policies and conventions. They can follow their own interests, react quickly to changes in circumstances and move and work in and between many areas and fields. The practices and situations of independent curators vary, and oftentimes they do not even want to define themselves very precisely. Veronica Wiman, for example, instead of definitions aims at permissiveness and freedom of interpretation both in her own work methods and the contents of her projects:

*My ambition as a curator is to create work methods and processes that are as non-hierarchical, critical and participatory as possible. I constantly evaluate decisions and seek beyond “simple” and obvious. I try to see the subject or work from perspectives of minority, gender and contextual influence. I am interested in taking risks and allowing for the situation to happen and trusting those involved.*

In spite of the freedoms, independence is not always a choice. For many it is the only available option. The precariousness of work is very common in the art field and long-term jobs have become scarce. Institutions hire independent curators on a project basis, usually for single exhibitions. The rising amount of biennials offer work possibilities too, but only for a selected few – and again, only temporarily. This forces independent curators to figure out new kinds of exhibition venues in addition to innovative exhibition concepts. The situation is worrisome in regards to curators’ sustenance, but the spreading out of artistic projects is a good thing, on the whole.

The elitism of art and exhibitions limited to “white cubes” are old and still somewhat relevant points of critique. However, independent curators are forced to come up with alternative exhibition venues whether they would want to or not. Among common solutions are different types of pop-up exhibitions, in which some unused space is temporarily used for exhibition purposes. Usually pop-up exhibitions take place in commercial spaces, but private apartments also host them. Additionally temporary exhibition structures have been set up in public spaces. Various sorts of hybrid spaces have also become common. For example, these include art spaces connected to shops or other premises.

Lack of money is common problem among independent curators. Alternative, non-commercial practices usually do not usually generate much income. Funding can be applied for projects, but at least in Finland these grants are mainly for production costs, and curator fees are not accepted as such (yet). Thus, the remaining options are finding new sources of support and other types of work. The example of Veronica Wiman is encouraging, though. Despite her experimental approaches – or precisely because of them – she has also been offered work possibilities in institutions and educational establishments. Apparently, by following ones own paths and realizing interesting projects one can also be noticed and respected by institutions. Hence I would say Wiman is her own kind of explorer too:

*I move in and out from the role of independent curator as I often have guest positions in institutions as well as guest teaching positions. The role and “lifestyle” of choosing to be independent has much to do with the research and contextual meaning I am searching for. It has allowed me to move around and place research and work worldwide. Curating is very much a personal journey and expression, a way of combining your passion to art and the way you approach life.*

### 3.5. Searching for alternativities

The practices of independent curators are often called alternative. However, alternative is a complicated concept, as in a way, all different practices are alternative to each other. It is thus relevant to ask, how – in relation to what – is nomadic curatorial practice alternative.

According to my observations, alternative and independent largely mean the same thing in the art world discourse. Alternative practice is mainly seen as practice taking place outside of art institutions, such as museums, kunsthalls and commercial galleries. However, there are commercial independent curators whose taste and thinking can be very conservative. In such cases, alternative is not a fitting description. Also, one should not forget that there are ‘alternative’ institutions, whose activities differ from others. For me, in addition to independence, alternative implies a certain type of idealism – interest in socio-political and ecological issues, for example – which is less apparent in most institutions and mainstream discourse. Analytical, critical thinking seems to be the basis through which this kind of alternativity is born. One must acknowledge prevailing

circumstances and thought models before questioning or proposing changes to them. Alternativity can also be seen in the contents and practices of art, as experimentation, and as working outside of the centres of art, such as big cities and more widely outside of the Western countries.

I would say both Veronica Wiman and Vanessa Gocksch are alternative both in their thinking and in their practices. Institutions and the mainstream feel restrictive to them, as Wiman points out:

*The research and practice I have searched for I could not have done within institutions or in mainstream environments. I am less intrigued by mainstream art practices, and have wanted to place myself and my work in unknown places or contexts, allowing for the unexpected and to learn about what I don't know.*

I tend to think similarly. Searching for novelty and originality – be it in art, artists, ways of thinking and being in the world – is essential to the idea of curating as exploration. Novelty occurs in institutions too, but working methods, spaces and audiences remain similar. Ways of speaking – discourses – can also become stale and generic. For these reasons, among others, new, unknown places and contexts are interesting to many. New places do not have to be geographically distant. Just stepping out of the institution into public space – the street, for example – is a significant change of context and can be very educational and refreshing for curators and audiences alike.

As one would expect, Nicolas Bourriaud also views disorientation and exploration positively. “The artist turns cultural nomad: what remains of the Baudelairean model of modernism is no doubt this *flânerie*, transformed into a technique for generating creativeness and deriving knowledge.”<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Bourriaud 2009, 3.



## 4. THE RELEVANCE OF RESIDENCIES

Residencies for artists and curators are an important part of the ecosystem of the art world. They allow for the kind of meaningful and productive mobilities, activities and interactions that I have explored in this research. Residencies can be solitary and social, to varying degrees. While solitary residencies can be great for research and meditation purposes, group residencies allow for more social learning and networking. In my interview with Kitty Scott, she emphasized the benefits of getting in contact with new people:

*A residency can remove you from the everyday world that you inhabit and transport you into this other world, these new sets of contacts, these new ideas. I think this is the way the art world functions at its very best. When visitors come to Banff, for example, they land in an international community and meet people from all over the world. It expands your horizons, expands your network, especially as a young person, to be with people who come from very different places, with different sets of ideas and ways of thinking.*

This is a very apt description of the benefits of nomadism in general. Interaction with different people and contexts can be very educational and inspiring, and residencies are very potential structures in facilitating these kinds of situations. It is easy to get stuck on routines and discourses when you stay in a familiar place for long. Displacement always shakes one up a bit. During my travels and residency experiences I have also noticed that people often communicate more openly when they are in newly acquainted groups with others who are outside of their usual social circle. It is as if they are relieved of the social role they are accustomed to performing. This kind of liberation can be empowering and lead to major changes in self-perception and practice. As Felix Semmelroth has written:

The artistic eye and the experiences that an artist makes in a country foreign to him can decisively contribute to a new view and new, self-reflective experiences not only in the respective art scene but in civic society. Unlike the standardizing thrust of globalization this form of artistic perception and viewing reality can make an invaluable contribution to diversification of different artistic and social positions and potentially even to new possible solutions that are of relevance to social policy – for example at present, in a time of economic crisis.<sup>20</sup>

Naturally, everyone who travels beyond artificial tourist resorts is prone to have new, self-reflective experiences. Artists and curators, however, are more likely to share these

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<sup>20</sup> Heck (Semmelroth) 2011, 2.

experiences to a wider public in the form of artistic output. I would wish everyone could travel around the world, if it was not for the ecological impacts. As things stand, most people on this planet cannot travel much for simple economic reasons. Hence, I hope traveling art workers take their privileged role as messengers and mediators seriously. Residencies in particular are something of a luxury – especially if they are free of demands. As Kitty Scott points out:

*Having absolutely no pressure from anyone to do anything that you don't want is a fabulous thing. That you are really unencumbered, that your time is not soaked up by things you don't want to do. The residency should be a free space for you to just dream and think, walk in the fields, go up the mountain. All that kind of thing is just as important for a curator as it is for an artist. I think it is often in those kinds of moments that ideas come to us – new ways of working, modes of operating.*

Some residencies are more work-oriented but even so, the displacement can provide enhanced focus and efficiency due to fewer distractions and concerns, structural support and fresh input from new people. The amount of distractions depends on the location of the residency, of course. Big cities may be better in terms of networking and new influences, but remote residencies have a kind of intensity in their slowness and quietness. There is not much to do except to work, think, read and discuss things.

## 5. 'ON TO A DIFFERENT HERE' – THE EXHIBITION

### 5.1. Curating and thinking about *On to a Different Here*

*On to a Different Here* was the exhibition I curated based on the concepts of nomadism and mobility that I am exploring in this text. The initial idea for the exhibition was to be fairly neutral and present works that dealt with international mobility and related issues in clearer ways – perhaps more in line with the main thesis text. While the themes certainly connect, I would say the exhibition turned out more poetic, also reflecting my personal anxieties and issues which had strong effects on me at the time.

In my view, the exhibition came to convey feelings of being out of place – of not belonging – and searching for something spiritually meaningful while also presenting relevant ideas regarding the strange contemporary condition we are collectively in. Nicolas Bourriaud's ideas of altermodernity were an influence in the back of my mind.

The curatorial process was fairly intuitive and subjective. I did not set out to formulate a clear, intellectual statement to be scrutinized. Rather, I wanted to create an atmosphere that resembled my personal experience of alienation and confusion – an air pregnant with information and uncertainty. The works I chose for the exhibition all resonated deeply with me, while dealing with the questions of location, loneliness, movement and personal transformation that I was reflecting on.

*On to a Different Here* related to Bourriaud's *Altermodern* exhibition in the sense that it was also about nomadism and displacement. Another intentional similarity was that both exhibitions contained works that were heterogeneous ("belonging to differing registers or cultural traditions")<sup>21</sup>. I wanted the exhibition to have an international aspect, as the basic themes were about seeking change to current conditions.

The first work I really felt like exhibiting was Gonzalo Lebrija's *The Distance Between You and Me III*. The first time I saw it was at a screening of Mexican video art at Forum Box, Helsinki, on August 15th 2013. The screening – titled *GRIT: Contemporary Mexican Video* – was curated by Joaquin Segura, a Mexican artist I knew from before through fellow

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<sup>21</sup> Bourriaud 2009, 4.

curator Giovanna Esposito Yussif, who is originally from Mexico but has been based in Helsinki since 2010.

Gonzalo Lebrija was born in Mexico City in 1972 and currently lives and works in Guadalajara, Mexico. In addition to being an artist, he is the co-founder and director of Oficina para Proyectos de Arte A.C. (OPA) in Guadalajara, Mexico.

He uses the mediums of photography, video, sound and sculpture to capture the aesthetic experience of time and the isolated Self. With an almost humorous nihilism, he explores the passage and futility of life, often focusing on the vertiginous possibilities of frozen moments. Lebrija has exhibited extensively in Latin America, USA and Europe. Recent exhibitions include the 13th Istanbul Biennale (2013) and the solo exhibition Possibility of Disaster, curated by Humberto Moro at the Center for the Arts in Monterrey (2013).<sup>22</sup>

I contacted Lebrija by e-mail, explaining my exhibition concept and time frame to him. He responded positively and connected me with his assistant, who sent me the video file through a file sharing website.

The work I was to show is called *The Distance Between You and Me III*. It is the third video in a series of the same name. In all of the three videos, Lebrija has a fixed camera filming a landscape. At the beginning of the videos, he passes the camera running from behind and continues to run forward until he disappears into the distance.

I liked the third version the best. The arid desert landscape appealed to me with its snow-topped mountains in the background. The grainy black-and-white video of 3:27 minutes is shot on 16 mm film and transferred to video. It is a solitary self-portrait and disappearing act open to interpretations. There is no sound, only the static image with the running character.

For me, the work represents a desire to escape and disappear from the present situation. The mountains in the video symbolised a better place, peace of mind for me. In many cultures, the mountains have been, and are seen as a place of retreat, meditation and spirituality.

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<sup>22</sup> Gonzalo Lebrija, Biography, Marfa Contemporary website, <http://marfacontemporary.org/eng/exhibits/artists/gonzalo-lebrija/>, accessed 16.12.2015.

The work itself is quite meditative in its nearly static simplicity. As it was the calmest and most minimalistic of the three video works of the exhibition, I decided to give it the biggest space – being the only one projected on a wall. The other two works were displayed on 42” flat screens. This setup was mostly due to the small size of XL Art Space. I did not want overlapping projections, and the screens looked good and filled the space nicely. The majestic landscape of Lebrija’s work fit the end wall of the space well and created an impression of openness and extension.



Still image of Gonzalo Lebrija's *The Distance Between You and Me III*, 2009.

Photo by Yu Shen.

The second video I chose for the exhibition was Jani Ruscica's *Travelogue*. I found it while going through preview videos on AV-arkki's website. AV-arkki is the distribution centre for Finnish media art and they have a good amount of it available for preview on their website. Jani Ruscica was born in 1978 in Savonlinna, Finland and currently lives and works in Helsinki.

Ruscica's application of video, photography, and sculpture exact a compelling exploration into the intersections of cinema, video art, theatre and performance. He is interested in how one defines one's

location, one's placement in the world, and how this definition changes – continuously if necessary – according to personal, cultural, representational or even scientific factors. Ruscica's practice articulates an expansive narrative of collective perception when temporal chronology is paralleled with biographical deductions of the contemporary zeitgeist.<sup>23</sup>

*Travelogue* is a black-and-white video (loop) of 8:00 minutes shot on 16 mm film and transferred to HD video. It was commissioned by the Camden Arts Centre, which provided Ruscica with a residency there – in London – in 2009. *Travelogue* was actually shot inside Ruscica's studio at the Camden Arts Centre. The work was finished in 2010.

On Ruscica's website, *Travelogue* is described as follows:

Drawing on both contemporary and historical texts about the city of London, from travel guides and blog travelogues to 19th century fiction. Ruscica's film deconstructs the idea of the travelogue itself as romanticised history, factual document and idealised experience. *Travelogue* points at two historically popular forms of travel entertainment – the moving panorama and the travelogue film. Highlighting the gap between idea and experience, and the difficulties inherent in creating representations of a place.<sup>24</sup>

I found *Travelogue* quite hypnotic with its minimalistic imagery and gentle, mechanical soundtrack. The text extracts surely contributed to the experience, as they were quite poetic and pleasant to read. All in all, the work is pleasant and calming, and the 8 minutes of duration pass quickly, in my experience.

*Travelogue* is also thought-provoking to be sure. It touches upon issues of urban development, social relations and even natural sciences. It also makes one think of the nature and conditions of travelling. Shot inside a simple studio, it is visually a deliberate opposite of traditional travelogues and travel shows. Thus, it hints on the idea that you can travel without moving too. Books are condensed worlds that can provide endless travels for the mind. Reading activates the imagination more than movies, for example, so Ruscica's choice of visual minimalism and text is on point in that sense.

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<sup>23</sup> Jani Ruscica, Biography, Jani Ruscica's website, <http://www.janiruscica.com/bio>, accessed 16.12.2015.

<sup>24</sup> Jani Ruscica, Travelogue, Jani Ruscica's website, <http://www.janiruscica.com/work/travelogue/25>, accessed 16.12.2015.



Still image of Jani Ruscica's *Travelogue*, 2010. Photo by Yu Shen.

The third video work I chose for the exhibition was Jaakko Pallasvuo's *The Cloud of Unknowing*. I found the work on his Youtube channel, where he puts all his video works for the world to see.

In my opinion, Pallasvuo is one of the most interesting Finnish artists at the moment. His practice has been deeply connected to and stemmed from the internet. He has been appreciated internationally as a relevant figure in what has been labeled 'post-internet art' – meaning artistic production that initially existed mostly online.

*The Cloud of Unknowing* is named after an anonymous work of Christian mysticism written in Middle English in the latter half of the 14th century. The text is a spiritual guide on contemplative prayer in the late Middle Ages.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Wikipedia article on The Cloud of Unknowing, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The\\_Cloud\\_of\\_Unknowing](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Cloud_of_Unknowing), accessed 16.12.2015.

Pallasvuo told me that while making the work, he was interested in how Christian mysticism could come back and gain new relevance in young people's lives as material circumstances deteriorate due to financial crises and precarious employment. This new "dark age" would kind of force people believe in the supernatural, because reality seems so sad and hopeless.

The work is a fascinating and strange mixture of sublime and smoky mysticism, bleak economic and political thoughts and imagery that mostly resembles food fetishism.

The main character in the video is played by a New York City-based performance artist called Jake Dibeler. In the opening scene he lies on his back and moves a blob of ice cream around his bare chest with his hands. The voice-over narrator that speaks throughout the video suggests the act is a form of prostitution that the character is forced to perform in order to pay off his student debt – said to mean "a soft slavery".

In the second and third scenes the character is still playing with ice cream, as the narrator speaks about the "the fall of the European Union" from a future perspective, and goes on to describe the dystopian reality of the time. Then the imagery changes and the narration switches to the theme of mysticism. The last scene shows a digital 3D rendering of Swiss Symbolist artist Arnold Böcklin's (1827–1901) *Toteninsel* (English: *Isle of the Dead*) painting, of which he made several versions between 1880 and 1886.<sup>26</sup>

As the view circulates around the mystical digital island, the narrator recites a piece of text, which is a modified quotation of the introductory text of *The Cloud of Unknowing* book, published by My Mind Books, 2012. The original text is as follows:

The underlying message of this work proposes that the only way to truly "know" God is to abandon all preconceived notions and beliefs or "knowledge" about God and be courageous enough to surrender your mind and ego to the realm of "unknowingness", at which point, you begin to glimpse the true nature of God.<sup>27</sup>

The version heard on Pallasvuo's video is slightly but significantly different:

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<sup>26</sup> Wikipedia article on The Isle of the Dead, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Isle\\_of\\_the\\_Dead\\_\(painting\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Isle_of_the_Dead_(painting)), accessed 16.12.2015.

<sup>27</sup> Stafford, back cover, 2012.



The only way to truly "know" art is to abandon all preconceived notions and beliefs or "knowledge" about art and to be courageous enough to surrender your mind and ego to the realm of "unknowingness", at which point, you begin to glimpse the true nature of art.

There is humour in this appropriation, but I also interpreted the modified text to be a statement in favour of open-mindedness, experimentation and wonderment in art. As such, it connects with the ideas of intellectual nomadism and exploration which are central concepts in this research.



Still image of Jaakko Pallasvuo's *The Cloud of Unknowing*, 2013. Photo by Yu Shen.

The fourth work in the exhibition was an installation work by Ivan Krassoievitch, titled *While I was Away* (2013). It consisted of 45 "intervened postcards", as he himself called them. Krassoievitch (b. 1980, Mexico City) lives and works in Mexico City. He has exhibited extensively in Latin America, the USA and Europe.

I met Krassoievitch in Helsinki about three of months before the exhibition was to open. He was going to do a residency at Arteles Residency in Hämeenkyrö, near Tampere. We were connected by Giovanna Esposito Yussif, who knew Krassoievitch from before.

Before I met Krassoievitch, I had checked his website and liked his work. However, I was not planning on exhibiting his work prior to the meeting. We met at a bar-restaurant called Siltanen in the bohemian neighbourhood of Kallio and talked for more than two hours about art, the scene in Mexico and life in general. I also told him about my upcoming thesis exhibition and the ideas behind it. He liked the ideas and told me he has dealt with similar themes, both personally and artistically.

I told him I could consider including his work in the exhibition, if he were to produce something fitting during his residency, which took place in October 2013. He seemed enthusiastic and before we departed, we decided to keep the idea in mind and be in contact.

After a couple of weeks at the residency he informed me of what he had been working on. The main thing was a series of old and new postcards that he had acquired from local flea markets and shops – and then modified, or “intervened”. He had detached the surface layers of the cards to varying degrees and moulded them into different shapes that resembled small sculptures.

Krassoievitch described the work as “post-postal art”, the poetics of which centre on the questioning and deformation of languages, objects and established materials as well as the customary uses related to these.

I liked what I saw and read, and felt there were fitting obsessive and melancholic qualities to the work. These deformed postcards would also add some materiality to the exhibition and make use of the available wall space. So I welcomed the work and met Krassoievitch in Helsinki before he flew back to Mexico. He handed the postcards to me in a plastic bag, along with instructions on how to install them on the walls of XL Art Space.

In our final live conversation, Krassoievitch also told me how his grandfather migrated to Mexico from the Balkans. Mobility was certainly a familiar issue in their family. Also, him

coming to Finland for a residency is quite close to the kind of nomadism I have reflected upon in this study.



Photo of a part of Ivan Krassoievitch's *While I was Away*, 2013. Photo by Yu Shen.

## 6. CONCLUSION

As presented in chapter 2, my research questions were:

1. What motivates independent curators of Western origin to be nomadic in their practice?
2. The professional and personal benefits and disadvantages of nomadic curatorial practice?
3. What functions do curatorial residencies play in the nomadic practice?

I looked at my interviews with Vanessa Gocksch and Veronica Wiman to find answers to the first two questions. In regards to the third question I examined my interview with Kitty Scott. With all the questions, I also reflected on my own experiences and observations as a nomadic independent curator of Western origin. The *On to a Different Here* exhibition was also a part of these reflections. Various books and articles also provided views and material.

From my interviews with Gocksch and Wiman I learned that nomadism can be a good choice if one feels like one's current environment does not provide sufficiently interesting research and work opportunities. Other places and contexts can be more receptive and fitting for one's interests and skills. One also learns a great deal when traveling and spending time in new and previously unknown places.

The so-called "peripheries" can allow for more things to be done. As noted, the Western "centres" are somewhat saturated when it comes to art professionals and events. Hence, one's contributions can be more significant and appreciated elsewhere. One may want to get away from a competitive atmosphere and opt for something friendlier and encouraging. One may also want to see and hear new things, as discourses in particular places may become repetitive and uninteresting.

I have used the term nomadism to describe physical mobility and intellectual and spiritual fluidity and broadmindedness. It seems these aspects are firmly connected to each other.

Gocksch's and Wiman's – and my own – nomadic ways of thinking have developed along with the traveling. As the nomad identity has strengthened, the courage and interest in finding novelty has increased – be it in the form of places, cultures or ideas.

The widening and enrichment of thinking is a significant reason to be international. The importance of international dialogue and cultural exchange is heightened nowadays, as nationalistic and conservative thinking has increased and become more political in Europe and beyond. Thus, a very relevant and lasting meaning of nomadism is spiritual: the kind of free and holistic thinking that questions artificial borders and structures – a cosmopolitan imagination, if you will.

Physical mobility and changing environments create many kinds of learning and working opportunities. However, as Gocksch and Wiman agree, constant traveling is unecological and also heavy and exhausting in the long run. Both of them also emphasized the need to belong to a community. This usually requires some commitment to a place. As it is, Gocksch and Wiman seem to have settled down now. Here is Wiman's summary of her experience as a nomad:

*To constantly move around and travel and arrive to new places is a great luxury and privilege but very demanding, and something one - I can do only for some time. It's hard physically and mentally. But the benefit of allowing you to do site specific research and interventions, to expose yourself and work to a foreign and unknown public, is something very fortunate. To collaborate with many and diverse institution teams, to have insight into many institutions and make use of various galleries or cities, is a fantastic privilege. The many people and places one gets to meet and see also became an addiction to me. But also brought a feeling of rootlessness and lonesomeness. I believe everyone needs a base to come back to and connect with a community to be satisfied.*

Once a suitable community is found, it is good to focus on developing local and more lasting activity that can then resonate globally. This kind of approach can be called glocal – a combination of global and local. I would say that is the essence of responsible and meaningful internationality – and curatorial practice.

As for curatorial residencies, I learned that they serve important functions as sites of learning, thinking and networking. Being removed from one's usual surroundings allows for a different kind of efficacy, especially if the residency is in a remote place – away from distractions and market concerns. Additionally, meeting new people and having

discussions broadens the mind and creates possibilities for new projects and collaborations.

I had two basic hypotheses which I also presented in chapter 2:

1. Curators may want to or have to move around physically to find work, audiences and personal development. Intellectual nomadism is beneficial in understanding issues and developing new ideas.

2. Curatorial residencies serve an important purpose in the contemporary art world. They facilitate meaningful mobility and networking – leading to new thinking and projects – as well as allow for “free time” to focus on research, reflection and writing, among other things.

Both of these proved to be true, considering the answers I got from my interviews. This was hardly surprising, as the hypotheses were quite simple and obvious, and based on my own experiences.

The value of this research may lie in reminding people of the significance of location and context, as well as of the continuing dominance of Western thinking in the supposedly global contemporary art world and its discourse.

I also hope to contribute to the discussion about the necessity and wisdom of the frequent traveling which is so common and respected in the art world. Climate change and environmental degradation are real and serious issues, and if the art world wants to maintain the idea of being the avant-garde of society – in the sense of representing the most forward-looking thinking – it should be serious about cutting its carbon footprint.

Most of the traveling relies on burning fossil fuels, which is unsustainable also in the sense that we will run out these fuels. Alternative methods exist, but will not reach the extent of the current, oil-based infrastructure any time soon. Localisation of economies and art worlds is thus unavoidable. The Internet may keep working, but our physical bodies and art works will be traveling less.

I am interested in continuing my research into sustainable, post-carbon art practices and community development. As Gocksch and Wiman, I have also come to understand that a good community is a very important thing for one's well-being and functioning. Most people – probably – want to feel like they belong somewhere. Finding such sense of belonging may require some effort. Presumable options are to look for one somewhere, or to work on developing one.

Communities typically form around common interests. As noted, my main interests are currently contemporary art, community development and sustainability. I will be looking for ways to combine these interests in my practice, and probably do some further research and writing. In any case, I believe the age of hypermobile nomad curators will be coming to an end as ecological concerns and the cost of travel increase. Nomadic agency will take on new, more local meanings – probably in the vein of 'think globally, act locally'.

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## Interviews

E-mail interview: Vanessa Gocksch, 21.4.2011.

E-mail interview: Veronica Wiman, 28.4.2011.

Live interview: Kitty Scott, 20.11.2012, Nida.

## 8. ANNEX

### 8.1. Attachment 1: Interview questions for Vanessa Gocksch & Veronica Wiman

#### Interview Questions

1. What makes curating & cultural work interesting to you?
2. What kind of art do you like the most?
3. How would you define yourself as a curator / artist?
4. What are the topics / issues / questions you are mostly interested in? Why?
5. What kind of roles have you taken as a curator? (For example, activist, researcher, artistic partner etc.)
6. As an independent curator / artist, what are the main motives and objectives for your work? (Utopias to achieve?)
7. How do you see the possibilities of art in raising awareness and changing the world?
8. Why have you chosen to work outside of the traditional centres of art? (outside of institutions and major cities)
9. Regarding your work as a curator / artist, how do you see the relationship between the global and the local?
10. What are the benefits and problems of nomadism (moving around, being in flux), in your view?
11. What are your thoughts on the current global crises (environmental, economic, energy, etc.) and their effects on your work and practices?

12. How do you usually fund your projects / work?

13. Can you name some of your favourite projects, and briefly explain what they were about? (Links for more info?)

14. What are you working on now (2011–) ?

*Thank you for your answers!*

## 8.2. Attachment 2: Interview questions for Kitty Scott

Questions for Kitty Scott:

- When did Banff start providing curatorial residencies?
- What were / are the main reasons / motivations for providing them?
- How does Banff benefit from them?
- What kind of benefits have the curators experienced, to your knowledge?
- Main differences between artist residencies and curatorial residencies?
- Does Banff receive and provide financial aid for the curatorial residencies or are they mostly self-funded by the curators?
- What are the interests of the funders, in your view? In Banff's case and in general?
- Do you have some favourite curatorial residencies that you could mention?  
(in terms of how they function and so on..)
- How would your ideal curatorial residency function?  
You can think of several models as well.
- Pros and cons of unstructured, "free time" residencies?
- Pros and cons of structured, production residencies?

- Open call vs. Invite-only ?
- Remote/rural vs. central/urban ?
- Views on what is a good duration for a curatorial residency?

### 8.3. Attachment 3: Press release of '*On to a Different Here*'

#### **On to a Different Here**

Gonzalo Lebrija, Ivan Krassoievitch, Jaakko Pallasvuo, Jani Ruscica

5.12.2013 – 18.1.2014

XL Art Space, Vuorikatu 22, Helsinki

Avoinna: ti-pe 12–20, la 12–18. / Open: Tue–Fri 12–20, Sat 12–18.

Avajaiset keskiviikkona 4.12. klo 18–20. Tervetuloa, välkommen!

/ Opening on Wednesday 4.12. at 18–20. Welcome, bienvenidos!

#### **- On to a Different Here -**

Sijainti on ihmisen elämää määrittävä tekijä.

Tämä koskee myös kulttuurialan ihmisiä, joiden elämän- ja työskentelyn laatuun vaikuttaa suuresti se, löytävätkö he yleisöjä ja yhteistyökumppaneita sekä toimeentulon ja inspiraation lähteitä lähistöltään.

Marginaalisessa asemassa oleminen johtaa helposti merkityksellisyyden, muualle kuulumisen ja liikkumisen pohdintaan. On luonnollista ajatella ja etsiä suotuisampia ympäristöjä. Se on ikiaikainen nomadinen tapa. Nykyään luonnonsyörien sijaan kulttuuritoimijoita ajaa liikkeelle usein arvostuksen puute ja taloudellinen ahdinko.

Liikkuvuus – tai nomadismi – voi kuitenkin olla arvo itsessään. Totutuista ympäristöistä ja rutiineista poikkeaminen luo uudenlaista ajattelua. Tuntemattomat reitit voivat olla avartavimpia.

Nomadismia voi harrastaa paikallaankin. Henkinen etsintä ja vakiintuneiden ajattelutapojen kyseenalaistaminen tapahtuvat mielessä.

*'On to a Different Here'* on ryhmänäyttely, joka käsittelee sijaintiin, yksinäisyyteen, liikkumiseen ja henkiseen muutokseen liittyviä kysymyksiä. Näyttelyssä on teoksia neljältä taiteilijalta: Gonzalo Lebrijalta, Ivan Krassoievitchilta, Jaakko Pallasvuolta ja Jani Ruscicalta.

- **Gonzalo Lebrija** (s. 1972, Mexico City) asuu ja työskentelee Guadalajarassa, Meksikossa. Näyttelyitä laajalti Latinalaisessa Amerikassa, Pohjois-Amerikassa ja Euroopassa. Viimeaikaisiin näyttelyihin kuuluvat mm. 'Who knows where the time goes' -yksityisnäyttely Faggionato-galleriassa Lontoossa sekä 13. Istanbulin biennaali.

- **Ivan Krassoievitch** (s. 1980, Mexico City) asuu ja työskentelee Mexico Cityssä, Meksikossa. Näyttelyitä laajalti Latinalaisessa Amerikassa, Yhdysvalloissa ja Euroopassa. Viimeaikaisiin näyttelyihin kuuluvat mm. 'Demasiado Futuro' -ryhmänäyttely CCEMx -kulttuurikeskuksessa Mexico Cityssä ja 'Protección contra el destino' -yksityisnäyttely Machete-galleriassa Mexico Cityssä.

- **Jaakko Pallasvuo** (s. 1987, Helsinki) asuu ja työskentelee Helsingissä, Berliinissä ja Lontoossa. Näyttelyitä laajalti Euroopassa ja Pohjois-Amerikassa. Viimeaikaisiin näyttelyihin kuuluvat mm. 'Flex-Sil Reloaded' -ryhmänäyttely Kunsthalle Sankt Gallenissa Sveitsissä ja Antagon-äänitaidebiennaali Turussa.

- **Jani Ruscica** (s. 1978, Savonlinna) asuu ja työskentelee Helsingissä. Näyttelyitä laajalti Euroopassa, Pohjois-Amerikassa ja Aasiassa. Viimeaikaisiin näyttelyihin kuuluvat mm. 'Conversation in Pieces (Pt. 1)' -yksityisnäyttely Galerie Anhavassa Helsingissä ja 'I See You' -ryhmänäyttely Kunsthalle Detroit -museossa Detroitissa.

Näyttelyn on kuratoinut Toni Ledentsa. Se on osa hänen opinnäytetyötään Aalto-yliopiston taiteiden ja suunnittelun korkeakoulun Curating, Managing and Mediating Art -maisterikoulutusohjelmaan.

Näyttelyä ovat tukeneet Aalto-yliopiston taiteiden ja suunnittelun korkeakoulu sekä Pro Av Saarikko.

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### **- On to a Different Here -**

Location is a factor that defines human life.

This also applies to cultural workers, whose quality of life and work greatly depend on finding audiences, collaborators and sources of income and inspiration in their vicinity.

Marginal positions tend to lead to reflections on purpose, belonging and movement. It is natural to think about and search for more supportive environments. It is the ancient nomadic way. Nowadays, instead of natural cycles, cultural workers are often driven to move by lack of appreciation and economic plight.

However, mobility – or nomadism – can also be a value in itself. Deviation from customary environments and routines creates new kind of thinking. Unknown routes can be the most broadening.

Nomadism can also be practiced without physical movement. Spiritual search and the questioning of established ways of thinking happen in the mind.

'*On to a Different Here*' is a group exhibition which deals with questions of location, loneliness, movement and personal transformation. The exhibition presents works by four artists: Gonzalo Lebrija, Ivan Krassoievitch, Jaakko Pallasvuori and Jani Ruscica.

- **Gonzalo Lebrija** (b. 1972, Mexico City) lives and works in Guadalajara, Mexico. He has exhibited extensively in Latin America, North America and Europe. Recent exhibitions include 'Who knows where the time goes' solo show at Faggionato Gallery in London and the 13th Istanbul Biennial.

- **Ivan Krassoievitch** (b. 1980, Mexico City) lives and works in Mexico City. He has exhibited extensively in Latin America, the USA and Europe. Recent exhibitions include 'Demasiado Futuro' group show at CCEMx cultural centre in Mexico City and 'Protección contra el destino' solo show at Machete Gallery in Mexico City.

- **Jaakko Pallasvu**o (b. 1987, Helsinki) lives and works in Helsinki, Berlin and London. He has exhibited extensively in Europe and North America. Recent exhibitions include 'Flex-Sil Reloaded' group show at Kunsthalle Sankt Gallen in Switzerland and Antagon Sound Art Biennial in Turku, Finland.

- **Jani Ruscica** (b. 1978, Savonlinna, Finland) lives and works in Helsinki. He has exhibited extensively in Europe, North America and Asia. Recent exhibitions include 'Conversation in Pieces (Pt. 1)' solo show at Galerie Anhava in Helsinki and 'I See You' group show at Kunsthalle Detroit in Detroit.

The exhibition is curated by Toni Ledentsa. It is part of his Master's thesis for Aalto University School of Arts, Design and Architecture's MA program in Curating, Managing and Mediating Art.

The exhibition has been supported by the Aalto University School of Arts, Design and Architecture, and Pro Av Saarikko.

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## 9. REGISTER OF IMAGES

1. Still image of Gonzalo Lebrija's *The Distance Between You and Me III*, 2009. Photo by Yu Shen.
2. Still image of Jani Ruscica's *Travelogue*, 2010. Photo by Yu Shen.
3. Still image of Jaakko Pallasvuo's *The Cloud of Unknowing*, 2013. Photo by Yu Shen.
4. Photo of a part of Ivan Krassoievitch's *While I was Away*, 2013. Photo by Yu Shen.